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DE RUEHKB #0269/01 0521042  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH (CCY AD95E21F MSI3030 634)  
P 211042Z FEB 06  
FM AMEMBASSY BAKU  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9667  
INFO RUCNOSC/ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY COOPERATION IN EUROPE

UNCLAS BAKU 000269

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SENSITIVE

DEPT PLS PASS TO USAID

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y - SENSITIVE CAPTION ADDED

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [PTER](#) [AJ](#)

SUBJECT: NEW SPEAKER OF PARLIAMENT DISCUSSES LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES WITH AMBASSADOR

**¶1.** (SBU) SUMMARY: On February 16, Ambassador and USAID Country Coordinator called on the new Speaker of Parliament, Ogtay Asadov. Asadov and Ambassador agreed on the need for May parliamentary rerun elections to be democratic and expressed confidence that Parliament would exercise a greater role of authority in the GOAJ. Asadov welcomed USG assistance to strengthen Parliament, but noted that Parliament already acted as an independent, professional, and representative body. He listed to Ambassador several of the projects he had in mind to improve the physical infrastructure of Parliament and improve the well-being of MPs. He also reported that discussions were ongoing as to this year's legislative calendar, but that the Parliament would consider amendments to the Law on Education, create a new pension system, and would also pass a new money laundering law by June. END SUMMARY.

**¶2.** (SBU) Ambassador congratulated Asadov on his new position and welcomed closer cooperation between the USG and the Milli Mejlis (Parliament). Ambassador highlighted the need for the May 13 rerun elections of ten parliamentary seats to be run democratically. Asadov agreed, affirming that the reruns would be democratic and reporting that measures had already been taken against election and local government officials who had committed fraud in November. He said the GOAJ was in a time of transition and could not immediately reach the level of democracy present in Western Europe, but he expressed confidence that the GOAJ would continue to make progress towards this goal. Asadov asked for greater cooperation between the US Congress and the Milli Mejlis, including more opportunities for Azerbaijani MPs to visit the United States. Ambassador agreed that closer ties between the two legislative bodies was important, but that it was also important for the USG overall to develop closer ties with the Milli Mejlis.

SPEAKER WELCOMES USG ASSISTANCE

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**¶3.** (SBU) Ambassador underscored the need for Parliament to exercise greater independence from the Presidential Apparat and for MPs to represent their constituents in a deliberative manner. With Parliament's greater diversity and the introduction of single-member mandates, the timing was ripe for Parliament to exercise greater authority. Ambassador highlighted USG programs that could assist with this task, specifically the Democracy Commission Small Grants Program and several USAID projects currently under development. These programs, he said, would help MPs be more in touch with their constituents by establishing constituency offices in

the regions and would help develop professional staff and legislative drafting expertise. USAID Country Coordinator also highlighted the specifics of AID's ongoing projects to help strengthen Parliament.

¶4. (SBU) Asadov responded that the GOAJ would welcome USG assistance. He said that MPs are already responsive to their constituents, as reflected by the fact that 60 percent of the Parliament was new. The MPs who lost their seats, he explained, had lost because they were not in touch with their voters. Many MPs already have offices out in the regions and keep working hours, but he said he would be receptive to USG help to set up offices for those who do not. He commented that he also was working to build the professionalism of Parliament, and had begun to do so by addressing infrastructural needs. Highlighting his impressions from his recent visit to the Turkish Parliament, he said it was his goal to give all MPs normal working conditions, including renovating offices and providing members with computers. In response to the Ambassador's suggestion that he could also work to improve the capacity of the committees to carry out the day-to-day work of the Parliament, Asadov responded that new personnel were being hired. Asadov also noted that it was important for MPs to be well-rounded; he said he intended to work on healthcare, sports, and recreational programs for MPs and the staff.

#### LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

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¶5. (SBU) Asadov also remarked on his plans for the coming year's legislative calendar. He said in the past, the goal was quantity of laws, not quality. Now, he said, the Parliament would look at Azerbaijan's laws and pass amendments to modernize them and ensure that they conform with international standards. He specifically highlighted that Parliament would be addressing the Law on Education and a new pension system. Ambassador asked Asadov to consider passing a money laundering law that USG experts have helped draft. Ambassador underscored the importance of the law for

fighting corruption and terrorist financing. Asadov responded that a working group had already been established on the law and it would likely be adopted by June. Ambassador also asked Asadov to consider carefully ODIHR's recommendations on amendments to election legislation. Asadov's assistant responded that the GOAJ was already working with the Council of Europe's Venice Commission and would formally meet in April to discuss necessary changes.

HARNISH